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ABSTRACT

A study examined a pilot program, begun by the State of West Virginia, offering fully accredited first and second year core college courses via satellite television to state residents who either had not attended college or who had "stopped out" of academic studies for a period of time. The study explored a course based on CMM 103, Fundamentals of Speech Communication, which enrolled 26 students, 24 women and 2 men, and the methods of teaching, using on-camera lecturers and on-site facilitators. The study reviewed the difficulties encountered, including problems with equipment, workbooks, broadcast times, and delays with feedback on completed work. The study finds that, in spite of these difficulties, student response to the course was exceedingly enthusiastic. Results indicated that the quality of student work was comparable to that of non-traditional students in evening sections of the basic course, with more than 60% of the students earning grades of B or better, no grades lower than C, and 2 students withdrawing in the first 2 weeks of the term. Findings suggest that audio reception between the remote sites and the broadcast studio need improvement for clear and effective use of student responses which would also allow questions and issues to be dealt with immediately, and that greater preparation time was needed to create visuals, examples, and vignettes to enhance the presentation of subject matter. (CR)

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BRIDGING THE GAP: TEACHING A BASIC PUBLIC SPEAKING COURSE OVER SATELLITE TELEVISION

Bridging the Gap

The State of West Virginia, in a concern that non-traditional students be able to participate in higher education, began a pilot program under the 1993 Higher Education Reform Act to offer fully accredited core college courses for West Virginians who either had not attended college or who had "stopped out" of academic studies for a period of time. The innovative nature of the program centered on the delivery of the courses over satellite television to remote locations--to "barrier bound communities"--at some distance from institutions of higher education. The program was designed to deliver first and second year general studies courses that could provide the basis for a major field of study or for the Regents Bachelor of Arts Degree, an experience based degree offered at institutions throughout the state.

Bridging the Gap began offering courses in 1994 with a range of course offerings that included Biology, English Composition, College Math, Economics, and History. Faculty at Marshall University were encouraged to offer a basic communication course for the Spring, 1995, semester.

Speech 80

The faculty who agreed to teach the course were Dr. William N. Denman, Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication Studies, and Dr. H. Keith Spears, Dean of Adult and Extended Education and a former chair of Communication Studies.

The course was offered in the Spring of 1991 on Wednesday nights for fifteen weeks from 7:00 to 10:00 p.m., with an opening audio bridge over telephone from 7:00-7:45 p.m., and broadcast time from 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. The course originated in the Instructional Television Services studios at Marshall University and was received at five locations: Hampshire, Lincoln, Pocahontas, Roane, and Wayne Counties. The course enrolled 26 students, two men and twenty-four women. The largest number of students was 16 in Pocahontas County; two sites had only two students, and only one attended in Lincoln County. Ages of the students ranged from the early 20's to late 50's. Some were beginning their experience with higher education, and a few were close to having enough hours for graduation at the end of the semester. Most of the students had participated in more than one prior Bridging the Gap television course.

Each of the five sites had a "facilitator" who handled routine tasks, which included the videotaping of the speeches and the proctoring of examinations. The remote locations were in high schools or vocational schools which were equipped to receive the broadcasts and provide telephone links to the originating studio.

Nature of the Course

The course was based upon CMM 103 -- Fundamentals of Speech Communication, which is the basic public speaking course for freshmen and sophomores at Marshall. The same textbook and workbook were used: Between One and Many: The Art and Science of Public Speaking, by Steven Brydon and Michael Scott and

Fundamentals of Speech Communication: Student Workbook, by R. B. Bookwalter of the Marshall faculty.

The assignments consisted of the usual variety of public speeches including an introductory speech, brief speeches that provided experiences in organizing messages and constructing arguments, informative, persuasive, and ceremonial speeches. The students presented the speeches to their immediate audience, while they were being videotaped, and sent the tapes and copies of their preparation outlines to the instructors for evaluation. Evaluation was provided by both instructors who viewed the videotapes, read the preparation outlines, and returned both along with evaluation sheets to the students.

Teaching the Course

Both instructors participated in the on-camera "lecturettes" and discussions, handling these in the manner of an extended conversation. Realizing that even this modified "talking heads" approach was likely to be ineffective in maintaining interest, the instructors developed a series of "vignettes" that dealt with the subject matter assigned in a given week. The vignettes were built around a central problem faced by both instructors that involved the need to be effective communicators. Both Denman and Spears were involved in the attempt to set up a student exchange program between the Department of Communication Studies at Marshall University and the Programme of Communication Studies at Anglia Polytechnic University in Cambridge, England. Both had visited England, and preliminary negotiations had been started to bring about the exchange. The vignettes centered on the various attempts of Denman and Spears to get funding to return to England

to finalize the exchange, to persuade students to participate in the exchange once it became operative, and to make the exchange viable.

The vignettes were generally no longer than five to eight minutes in length, and involved a series of "real-life" situations in which Denman and Spears were either unable to be effective presenters, because of a lack of preparation, or were, after the application of appropriate communication principles, able to achieve their goals. This "running theme" of getting back to England, and getting the student exchange going, provided a variety of examples that illustrated concepts important to the course. Probably the highlight of the use of this theme occurred when two faculty members from Communication Studies at Anglia Polytechnic visited the Marshall campus to finalize the exchange agreement and were interviewed for Speech 80.

In addition to the use of the vignettes to illustrate concepts, student speeches were used that helped to demonstrate effective application of course concepts. These "Speeches of the Week" were chosen from those assigned and videotaped, and they were used throughout the course to enhance the discussion of fundamentals of preparation and presentation. One of the first assignments was a "Two-Point Speech" in which the students had to discuss two important reasons why they enjoyed doing something or being at some place. This early speech was designed to introduce the students to principles of organization, particularly the use of supporting materials. One speech included a discussion of the value of "bear grease" to cure the

group, a topic that enlivened the evening's lecture!

After the informative speeches were presented a number of specific examples of effective speech organization were used to illustrate points. Particularly good introductions with previews of main points, or effective use of signposting, were played from the submitted videotapes and used as samples. In addition to the staged vignettes and the use of taped speeches, computer generated visuals were created by the production staff to highlight such things as definitions of terms and to focus attention on the discussion of particular points.

At various points in the course of a broadcast, the instructors would ask for responses from the students at the remote sites. The facilitators would dial in to the program, and the students would answer questions posed by the instructors. The broadcasts would be followed by a short audio bridge to handle any questions about assignments, readings, etc.

Problems and Successes

A primary difficulty occurred in the ability to clearly receive the audio responses from the distance sites into the studio. It was never clear if the problem originated in the equipment at the sites (the telephone units) or in the receiving equipment in the home studio. The ability to get good, clear, reception limited the give-and-take between instructors and students.

The use of the workbook, designed for a campus based course that is largely taught by part-time staff and graduate teaching assistants, did not work effectively. Library and listening assignments were difficult, indeed, impossible to implement.

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Weather became a factor on two occasions when heavy snow and ice prevented students from traveling to their centers. The delay in making up speeches thus missed created a longer time for feedback on the assignments.

Since the course was not scheduled until other satellite times had been booked, the course had to be broadcast at a time that became somewhat inconvenient for those students who had long distances to travel home. This late scheduling led to another problem: neither instructor had time to do more than cursory planning for the course prior to the start of the term. This resulted in inadequate time to do a careful job of preparing additional visual materials that could have further enhanced the quality and interest level of the broadcasts.

Because of the slowness of the mail, tapes of speeches arrived too late to be evaluated and discussed the following week, delaying feedback on the completed work. The quality of the videotaping at the remote sites varied considerably, as did the nature of the classroom in which the course was received.

On the success side, the student response to the course was exceedingly enthusiastic. It was hard to determine if this had more to do with the general sense that the course was not as nerve-wracking as it was originally perceived, or if the somewhat theatrical (read "hammy") personalities of the instructors created a good learning atmosphere.

The original concern that the instructors had that the performance nature of the course might be a problem was demonstrated not to exist. Those students who were apprehensive, managed, over the time of the course, to reduce that apprehension

and handle the assignments well. The use of videotaping did not present an apparent problem in apprehension. It appeared that at the sites where there were more than two students, those taking the course became a very solid support group for the few who had degrees of apprehension at the beginning of the course.

Even with the often very short notice, the production staff proved to be highly competent and often very innovative in handling last minute requests. Production values of the vignettes, in particular, apparently aided in their popular reception by the students.

The quality of the student work was, we felt, comparable to that done in evening sections or our basic course when they are composed largely of non-traditional students. Better than 60% of the students earned grades of B or better. There were no grades lower than C. Two students withdrew, but in the first two weeks of the term.

Changes That Could be Made

A first changes would be to improve the audio reception between the remote sites and the broadcast studio for clear and effective use of students responses. Improvement here would allow for more of the direct give-and-take found in traditional class settings and allow for questions and issues to be dealt with immediately. A second change would be to allow for and utilize greater preparation time to create a variety of visuals, examples, vignettes and the like to enhance the presentation of subject matter.

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Conclusions

The experience of offering Speech 80 over the Bridging the Gap program in West Virginia demonstrated that teaching a basic public speaking class over satellite television can be done. It demonstrated that students can have a high level of enthusiasm for such a course and can perform as well as students taking such a course with an instructor present in the room.

The challenge is to make the lectures and discussions as lively and interesting as possible while providing the information necessary for the successful completion of the assignments. The use of vignettes, the playing of student speeches as examples, and the use of computer-generated graphics can all be used to enhance the content and stimulate student interest. The student response to Speech 80 clearly demonstrates that such a well-prepared course can be a successful experience.